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Next stop: Rail service to Montreal?

By DAN TUOHY

N.H. Statehouse Writer

CONCORD — The initial success of passenger rail service between Boston and Portland is boosting interest in high-speed rail from Boston to Montreal.

Transportation leaders from New Hampshire, Massachusetts and Vermont say it is still just a concept, but support is increasing along with regional cooperation.

"We've got to think as a region. The future demands it," said Carol Murray, commissioner of the New Hampshire Department of Transportation.

Murray outlined the tri-state high-speed rail strategy for more than 50 people at a public hearing Tuesday night in Concord.

The high-speed rail service could travel at 90 mph or faster. Amtrak's Downeaster is expected to increase its 59 mph operation to 79 mph between Boston and Portland. Residents at the public hearing said the Boston to Montreal service should whistle along at more than 100 mph.

State Rep. William Leber, a Republican from Andover who sits on the House Public Works and Highways Committee, said he envisions a "bullet train."

Ron O'Blenis, project manager for the high-speed rail study, said that public involvement is important to determine whether the proposed 325-mile rail link is even feasible.

The study will look at the route through computer modeling to simulate train runs, depot locations, and possible frequency of runs.

The Boston-Montreal corridor would piggyback on the existing Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority rail line from Boston to Lowell and a pending commuter rail from Lowell to Nashua and Manchester. That line isn't scheduled to be completed until 2005.

The route would then travel to Concord, and continue on to White River Junction, Montpelier and Burlington in Vermont before arriving in Central Station in Montreal.

But how far off is the proposed high-speed rail?

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Transportation planners were not even throwing around target dates on Tuesday. Yet, consider that it took more than a decade for the startup of the 114-mile service from Boston to Portland. And one must also consider that there is no longer even a rail line between Concord and White River Junction. The state still owns the property, however.

Ed Simonson of Concord thinks that re-establishing the rail line is the top transportation priority in the region.

It would limit pollution from automobile exhaust and reduce consumer demand on oil. But for Simonson, a scientist, it is personal as well as practical. He often works in White River Junction. The best thing the states can do is start the route as soon as possible, even at 55 mph, he said.

"It's ready for trains now," he said.

O'Blenis said the study will address grade crossings, multiple use of the corridor and cost. The study may recommend that the rail line never be established because it is too costly or not feasible, he said.

The route was designated one of the nation's three new high-speed rail corridors by the Federal Railroad Administration in 2000. Of the 325 miles, 108 are in New Hampshire.

N.H. Statehouse Writer Dan Tuohy can be reached at 226-3633 or dtuohy@fosters.com